

## BEAR, DRAGON AND EAGLE: AMERICA'S CENTRAL ASIA DILEMMA

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**BEAR, DRAGON AND EAGLE: AMERICA'S CENTRAL ASIA DILEMMA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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## BEAR, DRAGON AND EAGLE: AMERICA'S CENTRAL ASIA DILEMMA

Since 2004 the US has been steadily losing ground to Russia and to a lesser extent China in the five former-Soviet Central Asian States (CAS) in terms of economic, political and military influence and access. After a very promising period following the 9/11 attacks, all of the Central Asian states, including insular Turkmenistan, opened their doors to cooperation with US-led efforts to combat Islamist extremists. There are several factors which have led to the current state of affairs in which the US is in the process of being expelled from its second and only remaining Central Asian base in the span of four years. First, US political and military engagement in Central Asia has frequently been disjointed and inconsistent, with diplomats conveying one message, while military actors have conveyed another. Second, frequently US interlocutors, both civilian and military have proven unable to promote a coherent regional strategy, which looks holistically at the national interests of both the CAS themselves and other regional actors, of which Russia and China are the most important. Finally, expectations have been poorly managed so that CAS governments and societies have generally expected more material, financial and political benefits than the US has been able to or willing to provide, and the US has had equally unrealistic expectations concerning how quickly underdeveloped, poverty stricken, largely authoritarian states can transform themselves into modern, democratic, free market entities. Frequently, overworked US government actors have lost visibility of Central Asia as they grapple with the more pressing and immediate crises in Iraq, Afghanistan and the other hot spots we see referenced almost daily in the news headlines. During this period, as the US focused elsewhere, Russia, China, and other outside actors began to intensify their efforts to enhance their position

in Central Asia, often in ways that undercut US objectives. These objectives include combating extremist groups that use terrorism against the US and its allies, fostering sovereign states with positive economic development and representative governments able to protect their borders and assist regional efforts to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology and narcotics trafficking.

Accomplishing these objectives will also help to set conditions to achieve a stable and secure Afghanistan, an outcome upon which rests the reputation of the US and the NATO alliance. It is also in the US national interest to achieve these objectives without causing Russia and China to join together against us in the region, or to combine their efforts to challenge our interests elsewhere in the world.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to provide US strategic leaders with a number of policy recommendations that will best promote outcomes in the region favorable to both US national interests and the Central Asian States themselves, while minimizing the potential for a great power confrontation.

### Background

Central Asia is, perhaps, the most misunderstood region in the world. The image many people have is clouded by the romance of the great Silk Road cities like Samarkand and Bukhara and the so-called Great Game, in which Russian and British soldiers, spies and explorers set out to expand their influence and control into this largely unknown region in order to gain a strategic advantage over their imperial rivals in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For Britain, these efforts had less to do with a desire to gain control of the region itself than it did with protecting its interests in India. Imperial Russia, relentlessly expansionist, sought warm water ports, a southern security buffer, and perhaps eventual control over India, the crown jewel of the British Empire.

The buffer that developed became Afghanistan, an area in which neither empire was able to assert lasting control. The Muslim khanates to Afghanistan's north were incorporated, often bloodily, into the Russian empire and when that empire fell, they were brought forcibly into the Soviet Union. The allure of Central Asia for westerners deepened throughout the course of the 20th Century, as the Soviet government closed these republics to outsiders, locating secret and sensitive military installations across the forbidding deserts and mountains.<sup>2</sup> The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s endowed these countries with an independence they had not struggled for and which the Soviet educated elites did not want.<sup>3</sup> And certain intrepid westerners began to descend on the region, seeking riches and adventure. The treasure they lusted after was not gold or silk, but their modern equivalent - oil and gas. Talk spread of a "new Great Game" in which outside nations scrambled to secure access to these treasures and in which the needs, desires and aspirations of the vast majority of Central Asians themselves appeared to matter little, if at all.

The newly independent Central Asian States found themselves victims of cruel geography. With no access to the world's waterways and surrounded by forbidding and dangerous lands, the region's struggle to make its way in the world was destined to be difficult. The rivers it did have, such as the fabled Oxus,<sup>4</sup> now desecrated by botched Soviet-era irrigation projects merely limped their way to a dying Aral Sea, itself transforming from a rich inland sea into a poisonous desert. Unlike the Persian Gulf, where oil tankers can practically berth next to the oil wells, Central Asian gas and oil must traverse expensive pipelines, hundreds or thousands of kilometers long in order to reach the global market. Development of the shortest routes, through the lawless

regions of western Afghanistan and Pakistan, where central government control was tenuous or nonexistent, were precluded by instability and violence.<sup>5</sup> With no tradition of democracy and a civil society whose development had been stunted by the centrality of the Communist Party in almost every aspect of life, the Soviet era rulers remained in power. The resulting “republics” were ill equipped to tackle the daunting challenges of independence, and in most cases have struggled to maintain the status quo.

### Common Factors

The Central Asian States are often lumped together along with such descriptors as “resource rich,” which serves to obscure the uniqueness of each of the five countries. To a certain degree this paper could be accused of falling into the same trap, as the regional focus logically leads to the need to employ generalities. That aside, one must not forget these five countries, while sharing many traits, are unique in many important ways. As a consequence, the general policy recommendations presented in this paper must be tailored to each country individually.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Central Asia to an outsider whose experience in “Muslim” countries is limited to Middle East, as is the case with many military personnel, is the aggressively secular nature of the political elites found in the cities. Despite the fact that the populations of the CAS are overwhelmingly Muslim, there are no so-called *Islamic* republics in Central Asia, a status that even the post-Taliban Afghanistan claims for itself.<sup>6</sup> This is a consequence of Soviet social engineering, which aggressively promoted official atheism as the state religion and has had a profound impact on the educated, urban elite and professional class. The overwhelming majority of Central Asians are nominally Sunni, from the mystical Sufi

school which originated there, and indigenous Islam is generally thought to be more tolerant of other religions than those strains of Islam frequently associated with extremist Islamist groups. Central Asian Islam also tends to include elements of pre-Muslim culture, such as ancestor worship, which are considered heretical by more doctrinaire Muslims.<sup>7</sup> However, this indigenous practice of Islam was largely obliterated during the Soviet period, leaving the post-Soviet populations eager to restore their cultures, vulnerable to the more radical strains of Islam emanating from other parts of the world. Nonetheless, among those holding positions of power and influence, Islam is thought of as part of one's culture and heritage, as opposed to an active doctrine to guide one's life. Central Asian regimes view political Islam (or Islamism) as a threat to their power and have ruthlessly attacked it throughout Central Asia. Islamist organizations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir have been outlawed throughout the CAS, and are frequently labeled "terrorist" organizations in an effort to link their activities with those of Al Qaeda. Thus far, Islamist activities have been modest in Central Asia, despite what would appear to be fertile ground for recruitment. However, the region has produced at least one authentic Islamist terrorist organization – The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Prior to the defeat of the Taliban regime, the IMU has found sanctuary in Afghanistan. From 2001-2002, the IMU fought alongside the Taliban against Northern Alliance and US-led coalition forces, its remnants finding sanctuary in the Pakistan border region after their defeat in Operation Anaconda.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the suppression of Islam and its consequences, there are many more enduring legacies of the Soviet period. The prevalence of the Russian language is one of the more obvious of these. Educated elites are frequently more comfortable thinking

and speaking in Russian than in their titular national languages. In Kazakhstan, for example, Russian is spoken by an estimated 95% of the population and is the official language of “interethnic communication,” while knowledge of the Kazakh language is a mere 64%.<sup>9</sup> Russian is the lingua franca of Central Asia, and is likely to remain so for some time to come, despite efforts to revive national languages. Another striking example of the enduring Soviet impact on the region is that in the decade and a half following independence, four of five presidents were holdovers from the Soviet period.<sup>10</sup> The sole exception was Emomali Rakhmon, a man with impeccable Soviet credentials backed by Russia during Tajikistan’s civil war in the 1990’s. There has yet to be a peaceful transition of power in the region, except through the death of a national leader. Perhaps the most glaring failure of Soviet social engineering is the enduring influence of clans in Central Asian politics and society. Clans remain the fundamental political units across the region, which has hampered the maturation of the political process and civil society in the region and kept central governments weak.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, the modern CAS are burdened by the lack of well developed national identities. Considering the current national boundaries are largely Russian imperial and Soviet creations, imposed on clan-based societies, this should not be surprising. Because of deliberate efforts to divide ethnic groupings, the modern boundaries in Central Asia only loosely correspond to the demographic picture. All of the CAS have sizeable ethnic minorities. The concentration of ethnic Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley, which crosses into the territories of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, has been a major factor in promoting friction between those three countries. The biggest losers in this process are perhaps the Tajiks, whose traditional

cultural centers of Samarqand and Bukhara are now located in Uzbekistan, and whose current capital, Dushanbe, is an undistinguished Soviet creation without historical or cultural significance. Some CAS regimes, eager to solidify their sovereignty and unite their populations, have engaged in the creation of national histories and cultural identities. In Uzbekistan, for example, Tamerlane has been designated as the national hero, complete with newly built monuments, whereas in Turkmenistan President Niyazov bestowed that honor upon himself before his death in 2006.<sup>12</sup> Tajikistan, whose road to independence has been by far the most problematic, officially dropped Russian style surnames in March 2007 in an effort to assert its cultural independence.<sup>13</sup> Given the short period of time these efforts have been underway, their prospects for success are not clear, nor is it known to what degree these civic identities will become entwined with cultural identities. Perhaps as a result of these cultural and political factors, there were never popular independence movements in the region during the waning days of the USSR when such movements were forming in other parts of the Soviet Union. At that time many Russians saw these republics as a burden, taking in more than they produced for the Soviet economy, and were thus not only willing, but in some cases eager to cast them loose.<sup>14</sup> The lack of a unifying myth for these modern states is another significant obstacle to the creation of cohesive national identities.

Another shared characteristic of the CAS is a legacy of environmental destruction and decayed infrastructure. The environmental concerns are particularly acute and affect all five countries, particularly with regard to water resources. The Soviet decision to promote domestic cotton production by cultivating a water-intensive crop in an arid region has had a profoundly negative impact throughout Central Asia, which is not

easily reversed since many of the regional economies rely on cotton. In Uzbekistan, for example, cotton is the single largest component of the Gross Domestic Product, constituting roughly 14% of the national economy.<sup>15</sup> Due to the inefficiency and poor state of the irrigation system vast quantities of water are lost to seepage and evaporation.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, rising soil salinity brought about by poor agricultural practices increases the amount of water needed for irrigation from year to year. Reaching an equitable regional solution is hampered by the fact that the two major rivers supplying the region cross and re-cross national boundaries and is further complicated by the diametrically opposed seasonal needs of upstream and downstream nations.<sup>17</sup> This situation, a result of Soviet boundary drawing and the creation of a unified water distribution system that was never envisaged to serve the needs of multiple independent states, means that only a regional approach will be successful in solving this pressing issue. Unfortunately, the CAS have tended to act in ways that promote their narrow national interests at the expense of their neighbors.<sup>18</sup>

One of the primary motivations for outside interest in Central Asia has been the widespread perception that the region holds vast, untapped oil and gas reserves. While true to some extent, some perspective is in order. Only three of five CAS possess significant petroleum assets: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. With no direct access to the world's oceans, accessing these reserves is extremely costly, requiring the construction of pipelines. Political instability to the south has prevented the construction of transport in that direction, as investors and businessmen shy from making such significant investments in either Afghanistan or Iran. The only functioning routes for Central Asian gas and oil to exit the region goes through Russia, which has



allowed that country to negotiate transit fees on very favorable terms. The Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is the single transit possibility for oil from the Caspian basin to reach world markets, but only Azerbaijan, on the west bank of the Caspian Sea and not a Central Asian state, is currently able to take advantage of this alternate route. A Chinese initiative to construct a pipeline across Kazakhstan is underway, but the huge cost involved makes this project uneconomical and it therefore must be seen as a move by China to improve its energy security. Finally, it should be noted that the Caspian resources are more akin to those of the North Sea in scale than to the Persian Gulf. Full exploitation of these resources, especially if the Russian transit monopoly were to be broken, would almost certainly have the effect of pushing oil and gas prices down somewhat, but likely not enough to fundamentally change the global energy market. From Central Asia's perspective, the main benefit of multiple energy transit routes would be to give them greater economic, and thus political, independence from Moscow.<sup>19</sup>

The other critical resource in Central Asia is water. Used for hydropower, agriculture and to sustain the lives of desert dwellers throughout the region, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, Central Asia's poorest countries, also possess the lion's share of its water. As is the case in many other parts of the world, division of water resources is a contentious issue and has been a constant irritant in interstate relations since the Soviet collapse.

In addition to the ecological challenges described above, the CAS face a number of common regional issues such as terrorism, extremism and the corrosive effects of corruption fueled by the transit of illicit drugs from Afghanistan. Indigenous attempts to find regional solutions have been hampered by interstate rivalries and mistrust. In

particular this distrust has been directed toward Uzbekistan, which aside from having the largest population and military in the region occupies the central geographic position and has frequently sent security forces into its neighbors' territory without permission from those governments. Regional mistrust, combined with porous borders, authoritarian governments, and generally weak security institutions makes the area vulnerable to many of globalization's ills such as drugs, human trafficking, terrorist operations and the spread of political extremism.

### The Outside Powers

Without a doubt, Russia is the most important outside player in Central Asia due to its cultural, linguistic, economic, and security ties, much of which are a consequence of a shared Soviet and Russian Imperial heritage. In the Putin era, Russia has become increasingly explicit in expressing its desire to maintain a dominant position in the foreign policies of the countries in what it calls the "near abroad."<sup>20</sup> This region roughly corresponds to the outline of the old Soviet Union and the late Russian Empire before it. In the Putin era, Russia has become more aggressive in its willingness to enforce its will in the "near abroad" both by military means, as in the case of its invasion of Georgia in August 2008, or by interference in domestic politics as exemplified by Ukrainian presidential election in October 2004. Russia has also sought to curb the influence of other outside actors in this space, particularly the United States, using a variety of instruments to include financial assistance, regional alliances, economic and diplomatic pressure, as well as threats and intimidation. The most recent example of this approach in Central Asia appears to have resulted in the decision by the Kyrgyz government to eject the US and members of the Afghanistan coalition from the airbase in Bishkek<sup>21</sup>,

which has been in operation since late 2001. The fact that this announcement followed closely on the heels of a Russian financial aid package, exceeding \$2 billion, gives the appearance at least that the decision and the aid package are linked.

Russia's perception of this region is complex and in some cases contradictory. Central Asians and their region are often seen by Russians as a source of terrorism, Islamic extremism, narcotics and other ills.<sup>22</sup> But reasserting national greatness, as the current regime seems bent on doing, is leading Russia to shore up and/or reestablish a sphere of influence, starting with those countries that belonged to Moscow's old empires. Central Asia, due to its geographic position far from Europe, has fewer options for finding geostrategic partners than those former-Soviet countries on Europe's fringes – Ukraine and Moldova for example, and is therefore a prime target for this sort of attention. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Russians were more than happy to cast off Central Asia, which many Russians viewed as a burden rather than an asset.<sup>23</sup> Today their attractiveness lies in their ability to serve as buffer states between Russia and a volatile South Asia, and as vassals which would increase Russian national prestige.

Beyond those already mentioned, Russia has several concrete national interests in Central Asia. Among these are maintaining its near monopoly on oil and gas transit from the Caspian basin, and stemming the spread of Islamic extremism, terrorism, and political instability. Moscow has a number of instruments which it can use to exert diplomatic, military, and economic influence, although first and foremost among these is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO, on its face, is a mutual defense treaty organization, whose very name seems calculated to invite comparisons with NATO. Four of five CAS are currently members, with Turkmenistan as the sole

exception. Under the auspices of the CSTO, Russia has established a military presence in both Bishkek and Dushanbe. With the reentry of Uzbekistan into the CSTO, the newly strengthened organization has served as an instrument for Moscow's active consolidation of its presence in Central Asia, both through military basing and subsidized arms sales to member states. Some have posited that the CSTO could undermine bilateral relations between the US and the CAS by obliging the Central Asian governments to "go through Moscow before engaging in any common military initiatives with the West."<sup>24</sup>

Russia also enjoys a huge informational advantage as the regional mass media is dominated by Russian newspapers, magazines and television. This should not be surprising given the preference many elites have for the Russian language and given that Russia, as a country of over 140 million people is able to produce richer and more varied programs and publications than Central Asia's 60 million people, divided between five countries. Nonetheless, publics and elites alike are constantly exposed to the Russian point of view, while access to Western programming is comparatively limited.

The second significant outside actor in the region is China, which borders Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, and has interests in gaining access to Central Asia's energy resources and maintaining stability in the region. China, like Russia, has been concerned with the increase in US presence in the region after 9/11. Although it borders three Central Asian states, China enjoys nothing approaching the cultural-linguistic linkages that Russia has. Much of China's border with Central Asia is along a natural barrier of nearly impenetrable mountains and Chinese culture and language have exerted a negligible influence in Central Asia, the historical passage of

Silk Road caravans notwithstanding. One of China's main concerns is managing its Turkic/Muslim minority (Uighurs) in Xinjiang province, particularly as it engages in efforts to settle large numbers of Han Chinese in the west. While the vast majority of Uighurs live on the Chinese side of the border, they are culturally and linguistically linked with the Turkic peoples of Central Asia.

Chinese objectives in Central Asia appear to focus on three areas. The first is securing access to resources, especially energy. The second area is in preventing Uighur separatist groups from using weakly governed Central Asian states, particularly the Kyrgyz republic which has its own small Uighur minority as safe havens. The Chinese characterize these groups as "terrorists" and while there do appear to be links between Al Qaeda and some in the Uighur population, it is probable that China exaggerates these connections in order to legitimize its own anti-Uighur activities.<sup>25</sup> The third area is limiting US presence in Central Asia, an interest it shares with Russia and which appears to have served as a foundation for cooperation in recent years.

Both China and Russia are bordered by strong US allies. Russia's western frontier is being brought ever closer to an expanding NATO alliance, while China's eastern border faces Japan, South Korea and other US allies and security partners in the Pacific. It is perhaps understandable if both Russia and China see a growth in US presence in Central Asia as an effort to encircle them. This is probably why a regional organization known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a six nation body whose members are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has continued to grow in both influence and capabilities since its inception in 1996. While Russia's and China's aims in Central Asia, particularly concerning access

to energy, may not be in concert, both seem to agree on cooperation to limit US and NATO presence. The SCO's stated aims are to tackle the same sorts of transnational issues as the US, EU and NATO programs – combating terrorism and drug trafficking, promoting economic development, etc. It should also be remarked, that while Russia and China may be promoting the SCO as a tool for reducing Western influence, it also provides both countries with a mechanism for keeping tabs on each other.<sup>26</sup>

Since 9/11, the United States has become a much more active player in Central Asia, to the distress of both Russia and China. Initially, Russia supported US efforts to topple the Taliban government in Afghanistan, but from the beginning had always intended a significant US presence in the region to be temporary. With the establishment of semi-permanent bases in both Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz republic, both Russia and China took notice, especially given that in the early years of this decade Uzbekistan appeared to be attempting to elevate itself to a regional power in its own right by means of establishing an alliance with Washington.

In general terms, the US approach to Central Asia has been bifurcated due to the different objectives of military and civilian political leadership. Whereas the military efforts, more focused on tangible considerations such as basing and security cooperation, have generally been fruitful, political engagement that focuses on democratization and human rights has not been well received by the regions' regimes. This has often been reflected in the different messages conveyed by high level US civilian and military officials – military and defense department civilians have tended to convey a positive message on the state of bilateral relations, while the political leaders have generally expressed dissatisfaction with the state of individual liberties, human

rights and economic liberalization in the region. It is very difficult for autocratic or authoritarian regimes such as those found in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, in which all decisions of substance must be approved by a single individual, to comprehend a multiplicity of messages coming from a single country. The resulting lack of US understanding of the CAS regime's points of view has been a major obstacle to US efforts in the region.

The instrumental US role in bringing down the Taliban regime, something which no regional power or group of powers was able or willing to accomplish was seen quite positively throughout Central Asia. The Taliban's theocratic government was antithetical to the secular approach to government of the CAS regimes. That the IMU, a terrorist organization with links to Al Qaida and the stated goal of establishing an Islamic government in Central Asia, had found sanctuary there made this southern threat doubly disturbing. Since 2001, however, Central Asians have become more skeptical of the prospects for the success of the state building project there and have felt the impact of post-Taliban surge in illegal narcotics. Central Asian regime efforts to freely use the word "terrorist" to gain US support for efforts to suppress free political expression also proved increasingly ineffective, particularly in Uzbekistan where the government's use of excessive force to reestablish control in the city of Andijan precipitated a crisis of relations with all western countries and effectively ended its strategic partnership with the US. US support for pro-democracy movements in Ukraine and Georgia, which toppled authoritarian regimes in those countries, was also viewed with some alarm by CAS regimes. The ouster of one of their own, the Kyrgyz Republic's Askar Akayev, in March and April of 2005, further deepened suspicions in Central Asia that the US'

support for democracy would not stop at giving advice. US assistance, as CAS regimes found out, came with many strings attached in terms of the conduct of internal respect for human rights and democratic norms, unlike assistance from Russia and China.

The US is not the only Western entity active in Central Asia. NATO is also a significant player in the area of promoting military cooperation and interoperability and is well suited to coordinate the assistance efforts of Western nations in defense related areas. As a multilateral institution, it also carries with it a greater element of political legitimacy, although NATO representatives must constantly work to educate Central Asians that it is not merely a front for the US. Since the Istanbul Summit in June, 2004, NATO has been making an extra effort to reach out to Central Asia and the Caucasus<sup>27</sup>, but Central Asian engagement has lagged due to the remoteness of these countries and widespread misperceptions about the alliance's aims. Recently, NATO has begun to increase multilateral political engagement with Afghanistan's neighbors.<sup>28</sup> These new fora may provide a venue for promoting NATO-CAS common interests. However, NATO's utility as a body to coordinate western engagement and assistance efforts in Central Asia has been hampered by a lack of agreement among alliance member nations concerning the alliance's role. Some allies prefer to maintain a narrow focus on defense related matters, as opposed to a broader approach to partnerships favored by other allies, including the US. For the most part, those opposed to broader engagement would prefer to see the European Union play a greater role where political and economic considerations are involved. This can lead to a disjointed multinational approach where western nations are concerned, in which the CAS must deal with the US and Europeans as separate entities for certain issues, and as a single entity for a



number of defense related programs. That a number of NATO partnership programs have explicitly political, economic, legal, and law enforcement elements only further muddies the waters. The necessity of dealing with many different groups can quickly overwhelm the capacity of small countries with small governments.

Nonetheless, the EU is active in Central Asia and has been a cooperative partner with the US. The best example of this partnership is the joint assistance Tajikistan receives to secure its border with Afghanistan. After the removal of the Russian Border Guard Service in 2005, Tajikistan lacked the capability to assume this mission without outside assistance. The US and EU provided material and economic assistance for this border mission cooperatively, with each entity focusing on one half of the border with Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all of the relationships the CAS have with outside countries, it is necessary here to say a few words about other important external actors in order to provide some additional context, since Russian, Chinese and US actions do not take place in a vacuum. Turkey, for example, has been highly active in the region, which it sees as belonging to the same cultural/linguistic sphere. The explicitly secular governments and “westernized” elites found in the Turkic CAS provide an added level of compatibility. Some have postulated that the continuing rejection of Turkey’s bid for EU membership could cause it to seek to form greater partnerships with the band of Turkic states from Azerbaijan to the Kyrgyz Republic as an alternative.<sup>30</sup> Turkey’s initiatives in the region can be considered constructive as their efforts to promote economic development and build security capacities and institutions are consistent with US interests. As a NATO member, Turkey’s security

assistance to the CAS is harmonized with US efforts through the alliance's partnership mechanisms. On the other hand, Iran has also sought to build economic and political relations with many of the CAS, although secular CAS regimes remain wary of Iran and are highly concerned with any efforts to promote theocratic government. For the same reason, CAS regimes are highly distrustful of Pakistan due to its historical connection to the Taliban. The fact that Central Asian extremists, such as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, have found sanctuary in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border ensures the continuation of this distrust for the foreseeable future. This has left the door open for India to increase its presence and influence in the region, although this influence is less than the more breathless reports from the south Asian media may lead one to believe.<sup>31</sup> However, as long as the CAS governments maintain their secular character and mistrust of Pakistan, India will have a significant advantage in the region.

#### Central Asia as Geostrategic Intersection

One might ask whether there is indeed any pressing justification for the US to play a major role in Central Asia. From a *realpolitik* perspective, such a role seems difficult to justify as the potential to create additional hazards to national security may outweigh the positive effects. Brzezinsky, for example has proposed a geostrategic model in which the post Cold War world can be thought of as two "Eurasian power triangles." The first consists of the US, Russia and Europe and the second consists of the US, China and Japan. He asserts that managing these triangles is critical to ensuring US security at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>32</sup> These two areas, which might also be characterized as Atlantic and Pacific security spheres, are generally

thought of as two separate problems, in which only the US is concerned with both. Like all such models, this one represents a simplified version of reality, useful for seeing the big picture, but lacking granularity when applied to specific situations. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Central Asia sits at the intersection of Brzezinski's two triangles, and is a geographic sphere in which Russia, China and the US are simultaneously working to expand their access and influence. Any US efforts in the region should be weighed against the effects these efforts will have on both of these great powers. As mentioned earlier, if our actions provoke combined Russian and Chinese efforts against America, an outcome which US foreign policy has been trying to avoid for nearly four decades, or worse yet, the formation of a Russia-China bloc, this would seriously degrade our national security, and not just in Central Asia.

In addition to *realpolitik*, useful insights into the region and its position in relation to the outside powers can also be gleaned from applying the cultural model proposed by Samuel Huntington in the *Clash of Civilizations*. This model, like Brzezinski's, is simplified, but can nonetheless yield valuable insights if applied judiciously. In a nutshell, Huntington held that *culture*, and by this he meant primarily *religion*, was the most important factor in determining where future conflicts would occur. This cultural paradigm was intended to explain global political dynamics and predict conflicts, replacing the bipolar model, which served this purpose during the Cold War. According to Huntington's model, most of Central Asia belongs to "Islamic civilization." To the east, Central Asia is bounded by "Sinic civilization," and to the north by "Orthodox" civilization. Huntington's model predicts a relatively high level of conflict along civilizational boundaries. Central Asia, existing at the intersection of three civilizations,

should therefore be conflict prone, much as another three-way cultural intersection in the Balkans has proven to be. With the notable exception of the Tajikistan civil war, the region has thus far remained relatively stable. The major clashes affecting Central Asia have been on the southern periphery where the secular CAS regimes supported the Northern Alliance in its struggle with the radical Islamist Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In explaining this, another concept introduced by Huntington, the torn country, may prove useful.<sup>33</sup> According to Huntington, a torn country “has a single predominant culture which places it in one civilization but its leaders want to shift it to another civilization.”<sup>34</sup> As a probable result of the variable effectiveness of Soviet social engineering efforts discussed earlier, those areas in which indigenous Islamic civilization was best preserved, the Ferghana valley and eastern Tajikistan, are in fact the areas most prone to violence and turmoil. In other words, the civilizational struggle which has most impacted Central Asia in the post-Soviet period is the internal one between cosmopolitan, educated elites and more religiously devout agrarian populations. If we attempt to apply Huntington’s model to predict the effect of cultural factors on the outcome of the great power rivalry, the result is ambiguous. None of the three outside powers belong to the same civilizational group as the Central Asians themselves. However, the extent that Central Asian elites have internalized Orthodox civilization would seem to give some advantage to Russia.

### Recommendations

In this section of the paper I will outline a number of recommendations to guide US political and military engagement in the region. Before proceeding, however, and to place these recommendations in context, it is necessary to examine our national

interests in Central Asia. In January 2001, the Atlantic Council of the United States and the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, SAIS, published a Strategic Assessment of Central Asia, in which according to the collective judgment many experts, there were “no vital U.S. interests in the region at present, and it is unlikely that there will be any in the years to come.”<sup>35</sup> The 9/11 attacks later that same year, changed this equation by making clear the degree to which terrorism, fueled by religious and political extremism, represent a clear threat to the U.S. homeland and other interests worldwide. America's activities in the region must be undertaken with this consideration firmly in mind.

The growth and spread of democratic government and institutions in keeping with our national values and the US role as the world's democratic leader is a prime interest, and one with the long term potential to reduce the appeal of political and religious extremism which are often fueled by repressive governments and a lack of economic opportunities. Democratization cannot proceed without economic development and the strengthening of civil institutions such as effective law enforcement and judicial systems. Furthermore, the principle of sovereignty must be upheld lest outside actors use coercion in order to thwart the decisions of the representative governments that we would hope to midwife. As Vice-President, Joseph Biden said in his first major foreign policy address after taking office. “It will remain our view that sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances.”<sup>36</sup> Despite the somewhat nebulous nature of the aforementioned interests, work in these areas will also serve to mitigate a number of concrete threats to America's security: terrorism, narcotrafficking and energy security. Regional instability resulting from failed or failing states or interstate conflict will adversely impact both our ideological interests as well as

the more concrete security threats. Finally, and perhaps of greatest concern to us in 2009, success of US and NATO efforts in Afghanistan, upon which to a certain degree rests our reputation as an effective and responsible global actor, will be greatly influenced by developments in that country's northern neighbors, both for good and ill.

In the past 4-5 years, the US has lost ground to both Russia and China in Central Asia. As I have argued previously, a significant Russian position in the region is probably unavoidable and attempts by the US to play a greater role should be weighed against our national interests in the region. These interests are limited and, in many cases coincide with those of our rivals, especially when it comes to ensuring Central Asian governments are capable of securing their borders as well as providing their own internal security. The US, Russia, China, as well as Europe and others,, are all threatened by the spread of extremism, terrorism, illicit narcotics and interstate conflict with its potential to adversely impact energy exports. The major players' interests are in discord in two primary areas. The first is how access to energy resources is to be configured. Russia would like to retain exclusive access to these resources, while China seeks its own direct access. The US would like expanded and diversified access to bring Caspian oil and gas to world market, leaving regional states with options that do not leave them at the mercy of any single state and calculating that increased availability of these resources on the global market will have a positive effect on oil and gas prices. The second item of discord is the desired direction of political developments in the region. Russia would benefit from relatively authoritarian Central Asian governments with explicitly pro-Russian orientations, which can be easily manipulated to serve Russian interests. The authoritarian regime in China would also be threatened

by the growth of democratic governments on its western flank, particularly as this development could adversely impact its efforts to displace the Uighur minority in Xinjiang. Insofar as democratic governments would likely be friendlier to the US and Western Europe, both Russia and China may view democratization efforts as a shared threat.

While specific policies must change and evolve with developments, there are a number of general principles that if appropriately applied could serve to increase the effectiveness of US foreign policy in Central Asia. The first of these is to adopt a more regional approach. This applies both to how the US engages these countries, as well as how the CAS should approach the significant challenges they face in the areas of security, economics and the environment. The US can continue to promote regional cooperation in areas such as information sharing and combined efforts to combat terrorism, narco-trafficking, trafficking in human beings and other law enforcement efforts. Assisting with indigenous efforts, when consistent with US interests and values is less likely to be viewed as interference, a charge to which Washington is already vulnerable. Indeed, solving critical problems such as the dilapidated water distribution system will only be possible through multilateral dialogue and regional institutions that balance the needs of all countries and adopt a collective approach to critical infrastructure repairs and improvements. Extra effort must also be applied to harmonize US government efforts into a single, coherent policy. Both political and military objectives and interests should be appropriately balanced and applied with greater consistency than in recent years. The unintentionally bifurcated US approach has put America at a disadvantage in the competition for influence and access in Central Asia.

Many actors both within the region and externally will be suspicious of US motives in Central Asia, however well intentioned these efforts are. The best antidote to this is a transparent approach that seeks cooperation with Russia and China when possible. Realistically, building a high level of trust with Russia and China is probably not achievable in the near future – diverging geostrategic goals will almost certainly make this impossible. There is room, however, for limited cooperation in the areas of common national interest outlined earlier. The US should consider reaching out to regional organizations, primarily the SCO and CSTO. While such overtures are likely to be rejected initially<sup>37</sup>, over time both organizations will risk exposing themselves to criticism that they are, as suggested earlier in this paper, tools to isolate Central Asia from the West. Transparency, particularly if US efforts remain focused on areas that benefit Central Asians can become a potent strategic communications asset over time. Western actors engaging the SCO and CSTO must, however, be wary lest these instruments are used to hamper true bilateral engagement by inserting Russian or Chinese influenced intermediaries between them and the Central Asian societies and governments.

Consistent with our values and national interest in maintaining the global order, the US must continue to support democratization and efforts toward economic modernization and reform throughout Central Asia, even where these objectives are met with resistance from internal and external actors. Americans must be patient and resist the urge to fix every problem immediately. A slow, steady and deliberate approach that takes the long view will be more productive than the short, intense bursts of interest, followed by periods of neglect and disinterest which have too often



characterized US efforts in the region. Managing expectations on both sides will be a critical element to improving relations, as the US may have set the bar for human rights and democratization too high too quickly, while failing to provide the economic and military aid CAS regimes felt was their due for supporting the US in the War on Terror. Insofar as possible, the US must work to protect the sovereignty of the CAS and preserve their ability to be independent actors, free to choose political and economic arrangements that best serve their own national interests. While most of these governments, with the possible exceptions of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, are moving closer to Russia, all of them nonetheless want to preserve their independence. It is in our interest to see these states do not become vassals of the powers around them. Just as the Russian invasion of Georgia has affected the political dynamic in Central Asia, events in the CAS will influence developments in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe – both for good and ill.

Finally, the single biggest failing for US foreign policy in Central Asia has been an apparent unwillingness or inability to understand the points of view of both the governments and people. When we ask the small, weak Kyrgyz Republic to host a US military airbase in defiance of two very large and powerful neighbors, we must offer more than a few million dollars in security assistance and rent for facilities. To expect a positive outcome for retaining this base in the face of Russian and Chinese opposition is to expect the Kyrgyz Republic to make an irrational decision, willingly placing itself in the position of Melos facing not one, but two Athens. We must consider that Central Asian calculations of national interest were doubtless affected by the Russian invasion of Georgia, which starkly demonstrated the perils of relying on US friendship and

goodwill as a basis for national security. Therefore, US cooperation efforts in the region must be undertaken so as to improve the overall geopolitical position of our Central Asian partners, even if that means taking Russian and Chinese objectives into consideration. And success in Afghanistan is critical to the national security of both countries, even if they are loath to admit it. If we attempt to force Central Asian governments to choose between the US on the one hand and Russia and China on the other, we will lose. The best strategic outcome for Central Asia and the US is likely to be achieved not by forcing the CAS to choose between suitors, but by enabling them to continue to balance the interests of all of the outside powers.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Kugler, *Policy Analysis in National Security Affairs: New Methods for a New Era*, (Washington D. C.: National Defense University Press, 2006), 158-165.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include the Soviet space launch facilities at Baikonur, Kazakhstan, the space tracking station "Okno" in Tajikistan and a torpedo testing facility at Lake Issik-kul in the Kyrgyz Republic. There are many others.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or nationalism?*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>4</sup> The Oxus is now more commonly referred to as the Amu Darya.

<sup>5</sup> As of this writing construction has yet to begin on the proposed Trans-Afghan Pipeline, originally proposed in 1995, which if built would bring natural gas from Turkmenistan to India and Pakistan. Source: Erik A. Kreil, International Energy Markets, Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy, interview by author, Carlisle Barracks, PA, March 5, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Afghanistan's official name is the Islamic Republic of Afghansitan.

<sup>7</sup> Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or nationalism?*, 246-247.

<sup>8</sup> In a 2004 interview, noted Central Asian expert, Ahmed Rashid, gave the following assessment: "The IMU has always remained a presence in Central Asia. At the end of the war with the Taliban, the military force of the IMU, which was based in Afghanistan, was clearly wiped out. But some of them have escaped to the Pakistan border, where they've been living. But I think the real threat has always been the IMU's underground network inside Central Asia."

And that really has not been broken.” See “See Ahmed Rashid, “Central Asia: Is the IMU Still a Threat to Regional Security?,” interview by RFE/RL, Eurasianet.org website <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp012404.shtml> (accessed March 13, 2009).

<sup>9</sup>The prevalence of Russian in Kazakhstan in particular is partially explained by the high percentage of ethnic Russians, who constitute roughly one third of the population. Language percentages taken from *The CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/kz.html> (accessed March 13, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> For background on this phenomenon, See Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private lives in Stalin's Russia*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2008) 341. Figes writes, “Orphan children were especially susceptible to the propaganda of the Soviet regime because they had no parents to guide them or give them any alternative system of values.” Both Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan and Saparmurat Niyazov, former Turkmenistan president are alleged to have been raised in Soviet orphanages.

<sup>11</sup> Erik A. Kreil, International Energy Markets, Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy, interview by author, Carlisle Barracks, PA, March 5, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> This assertion is largely based on the author's personal experiences traveling through Central Asia multiple times from 2004 to 2008. For a detailed examination of this phenomenon see William O. Beeman, “The Struggle for Identity in Post-Soviet Tajikistan,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 4 (December 1999), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue4/jv3n4a7.html> (accessed February 1, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> “Tajiks Must Drop Russian Names,” *BBC News*, 27 March, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6500985.stm> (accessed February 1, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or nationalism?*, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> *U.S. Department of State, Background Note: Uzbekistan*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2924.htm> (accessed 10 March, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Christopher R. Kedzie, “Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones: The Crossing from Soviet Domination to Self Rule in the Republics of Central Asia,” *RAND Paper*, (RAND: Santa Monica, 1995) 16-19.

<sup>17</sup> The upstream nations (Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan) require more water be released in the winter months for electric power generation, whereas the downstream cotton producers (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) require more water be released during the summer growing season.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Scott, acting chief of the National Human Development Report Unit within the UNDP, “Central Asia: UN Sees Weak Leadership on Water Issues,” interview by Julie Conwin, *RFE/RL*, November 9, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/Content/Article/1072623.html> (accessed 10 March 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Full development of the Caspian basin's oil potential would yield an estimated 4 million barrels per day. Source, Erik A. Kreil, International Energy Markets, Energy Information

Administration, US Department of Energy, interview by author, Carlisle Barracks, PA, March 5, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Central Asian Policy and the Role of Russian Nationalism*, Silk Road Paper (Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2008) 8-10.

<sup>21</sup> Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "Kyrgyzstan Leaves U.S. out in the Cold," *BBC News*, February 24, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/7901426.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7901426.stm) (accessed February 24, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Central Asian Policy and the Role of Russian Nationalism*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Lena Johnson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004) 43.

<sup>24</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Central Asian Policy and the Role of Russian Nationalism*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Bates Gill and Matthew Oresman, *China's New Journey to the West*, CSIS Report (Washington D.C.: CSIS, 2003) 15-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> The North Atlantic Council, *Istanbul Summit Communiqué*, June 28, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Kurt Volker, "U.S. Ambassador to NATO Talks about the Way Forward in South Asia," interview by RFE/RL, RFE/RL, March 13, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/US\\_Ambassador\\_To\\_NATO\\_Eyes\\_Victory\\_In\\_South\\_Asia/1509693.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/US_Ambassador_To_NATO_Eyes_Victory_In_South_Asia/1509693.html) (accessed March 22, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> *The European Union's Border Management Programme in Central Asia*, <http://bomca.eu-bomca.kg/en/tajikistan> (accessed 15 March, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 46.

<sup>31</sup> Most of these reports come from the South Asian press. The author visited the Ayni site in 2004 with the U.S. Defense Attache, who assured him at that time reports of an Indian airbase in Tajikistan were absolutely false. At that time the Ayni site consisted of a gravel runway with no aircraft and few visible structures. While it is possible some work has been done since 2004, it is likely that the pattern of exaggeration has continued. In any case, these reports must be viewed in the context of the information campaigns between India and Pakistan.

<sup>32</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Geostategic Triad: Living with China, Europe, and Russia*, (Washington, D.C.: The CSIS Press, 2001), 1-48.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*, 138-149.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 138.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Fairbanks, S. Frederick Starr, C. Richard Nelson, and Kenneth Weisbrode, *Strategic Assessment of Central Asia*, (Washington D.C.: The Atlantic Council, 2001) 96.

<sup>36</sup> "Biden Rejects Russian Sphere of Influence," *The New York Times*, Feb 8, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/washington/08biden.html?\\_r=1&ref=world&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/washington/08biden.html?_r=1&ref=world&pagewanted=print), (accessed February 9, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> The U.S. reportedly applied for observer status in the SCO in 2005, but the application was rejected. See, Ariel Cohen, "What to Do about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Rising Influence," *Eurasianet.org website*, 21 September, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav092106.shtml> (accessed 15 March, 2009).

